

THE SIGHTLESS ATHLETE

J. E. Baker

HV1659 B copy 2





**M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY  
AMERICAN PRINTING  
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**



# THE SIGHTLESS ATHLETE

copy 2

HOW THE BLIND ARE TAUGHT TO TAKE EXERCISE

BY J. E. BAKER

THE argument generally advanced in favor of scholastic athletics, applies to schools for the blind; but there are especial reasons why the blind boy needs vigorous play. Groping in darkness, he has been made timid by a hundred knocks. Instead of being hardened by his experience, the uncertainty of these knocks makes him peculiarly hesitating in his movements. The constant strain on his nerves of this expectancy of a hurt is debilitating and hence the great majority of blind boys take exercise no more strenuous than a walk or a sun bath. Blind boys are like all other boys in their impulses and desires. It is as natural for them as it is for those with vision to be bounding and buoyant. Strength of limb and dexterity of movement are as much admired and as eagerly emulated by them as by others of their age. The play instinct is as active among the sightless as among the seeing. Mischievous tendencies are in no wise monopolized by the children who can see. Shut in from all the world, with a sluggish body, but with an imagination made active by training and environment, the sightless lad is particularly liable to insidious suggestion. As the sun and the winds oxidize the sewage of a great city; so will they destroy the impurities in a mind that would be clean. Athletics bring the boy into those purifying surroundings, give his blood a healthy flow, furnish his muscles an invigorating employment and supply an atmosphere in which morbid thoughts cannot thrive.

And so the experiment in outdoor work was begun. Running, jumping, putting the shot and kicking the football were the first recreations tried. Of course, it would not do to start these boys on a cross-country run alone, but by way of substitute all

took hold of a long rope, a boy who could see a little was put in as leader, and jaunts were thus taken down the road. Running seems to be a simple thing, but after being leader of the rope myself a few times, I concluded that I had to pull altogether too hard for the speed forthcoming from the boys. Upon watching the different individuals, it was observed that several were simply being pulled into a swift walk. On questioning these, I learned that they had been born blind. They had never seen any one run. They did not know how to run. To watch these individuals as they tried, to tell them to lean forward, to "get on their toes," to take longer strides, was the next step. Corrective work like the hopping stride, running as high on the toes as possible, and swinging the arms with a quick jerk to lengthen the stride, was occasionally given. Later in the season the boys were divided into two squads, the division being made on the basis of speed, and the distance was lengthened as their limited endurance increased.

In jumping (the standing broad jump) the same difficulty prevailed as in running. Some did not know what a jump was like. The motion was analyzed and each detail taught separately. In this event, the peculiar timidity of the blind seemed most to manifest itself. The uncertainty as to what, where, and how they would strike, in their flight through the air, seemed utterly to unnerve some. The sensation they experienced is much like that of one, who, walking downstairs in the dark, thinks he has reached the floor, but finds he has another step to go. At first the boys would make only the slightest exertion, and in some cases had to be pushed and given a few tumbles in the soft dirt to arouse their grit.



The shot-put was easy to get started, but gave considerable trouble in the later stages of mastering the form. For the sake of exercise the boys were told simply to push the shot, but as soon as they developed arm control, attention was given to the help the body may lend. The movements are so complicated that description was next to useless. So the coach posed, while the boys felt him over to learn the relative positions of the body and the muscles used. Then they practiced the pose, changing from one to the next succeeding. The ring from which they threw was formed, at first, by a ditch about eight inches wide and six inches deep, but later two sections of a wagon wheel rim fastened securely at the front and the back of the ring were found to be much better. Although work was much facilitated by having a seeing boy in each squad, most of the totally blind could find the shot in a short time by going in the direction of the sound made when it dropped.

Learning to kick the football was easy. Both the punt and the drop-kick were quickly learned. When left to themselves, the teams lined up on the opposite ends of the field, then, from a given number of paces back of the center of the field, one captain kicked the ball into his opponent's territory. The opponent who obtained the ball, returned it by kicking from the point where the ball stopped. In this manner the ball was punted back and forth until one side drove the other into a driveway that bounded either end of the field. This may seem like a sort of drop-the-handkerchief football, but on the contrary the play required close attention, quick starting, a great deal of running and hard kicking. Besides, when two blind boys are hard after the same ball, bumps are about as likely to occur as from any combination one can name.

The same exercises, performed in almost the same manner as in ordinary gymnasia, prevail in those for the blind. Marching, setting-up exercises, Swedish movements, dumb-bell drill, and apparatus work comprise the main list. The boys line up at the beginning of the class in order of height. They have to be arranged by the teacher, at first. After that, each one remembers who is above or below him and arranges himself accordingly. By

touching elbows they keep their line straight, and when the order of march is given, they turn and wheel with ease. The sound of the step in front helps them to keep an orderly line of march, but good results are principally obtained by constant practice and correction until habits of muscular precision are formed. So great are the possibilities, that by culling out the poorest performers and placing the partially sighted in advantageous positions fancy figure marches and Spanish dances are given frequently before audiences.

By using marching orders, positions on the floor are easily found, but any one familiar with gymnastic work knows that beginners find it hard to keep in one place. The blind boy when out of place must be told which way to step. He learns a setting-up exercise by being told minutely the movement and position, but more often by feeling of some one who poses for him. The dumb-bell and Swedish drills are learned from poses and directions the same as the setting-up exercises. In this connection it is well to remember that the blind boy gets more mental discipline out of this work than the ordinary boy, for while the latter generally copies the movement from his leader, the blind boy must take his sequences from verbal orders, which entails closer mental application. Some work is done with Indian clubs, but the *finesse* of this exercise depends so much upon optical effects and illusions that the practice required is not repaid by the results obtained.

The use of apparatus brought about a rather sharply defined line of cleavage between two classes of boys, those with nerve and those without. The former learned "stunts"; the latter clung helplessly and fearfully to the apparatus. The parallel bars were used most frequently. The beginning and ending positions of simple and complete "cut-offs," "turns," and "upstarts" are learned from poses, the intermediate action from the teacher's description. While the pupil is learning some one must watch him closely to prevent serious falls, for a blind boy's nerve is shaken as easily as another's. Light falls, however, are often productive of good, because a boy with spirit does not mind a hurt that is not too severe and the experience helps his grit. With a little prac-



tice the boys learn to balance upon and to grip the apparatus, and when the "at home" feeling develops, they need only suggestions to try all varieties of movements. Especially is this true of work upon the horizontal bar. Even little fellows nine years old do simple turns, while the older boys practice all the "feats" common to gymnasia for the seeing.

Last year the gymnasium was given a Christmas present in the shape of a punching-bag. Like a new toy it attracted the attention of all the boys. Those who have tried to punch the bag know its elusiveness and its surprising antics. The blind boys also soon learned to appreciate this quality in the bag, which aroused the boys' fighting spirit and determination to conquer. Besides, the rythmical thuds of the skillfully handled bag are especially alluring to the blind. So they kept on fooling and tussling with the bag until they had learned straight punches, side punches, elbow blows and combinations of all of them. Punching the bag is a matter of placing the blow accurately and sharply. With the conception of the movement thoroughly in mind, the difficulties of becoming expert are about equal between the blind and the seeing boy. It is all a matter of perfect muscular co-ordination. But in getting those conceptions throughout the whole course of training, both in gymnasium and in field work, the blind boy simply needs better teaching and more of it, patience, determination and faith in the ultimate possibilities of his achievement.

The most popular of all outdoor events, probably, is the thirty-five yard dash. Now, nobody with or without eyes can run straight very far unless it be toward some mark. The sighted sprinter has his alley to guide him and the tape in front. So for the blind boys a string of sleigh bells is rung at the finish. Collisions resulted twice only, during last season. The abandon which the boys display in this race is a revelation, and their performances are very creditable. It is the opinion of the writer that, other conditions being equal, the sightless boy gets a faster start than his seeing brother: the blind boy never looks out of the "tail of his eye," and his co-ordination between ear and muscle is closer and more nicely adjusted.

The success of blind boys in athletics,

the same as with boys who know the light, is determined largely by the personal equation. Some boys are naturally graceful, others naturally awkward. Some will learn a gymnastic feat almost without effort, others, only after the most faithful labor. In short, some have a well-developed muscular sense, while others have but the faintest traces of it. For those who measure success by marks, the records made by sightless athletes at the Wisconsin School for the Blind, will be interesting. These records should not be supposed to equal performances of high school boys, because the training was for all-round development. No one specialized in any one event.

Standing broad jump.....	7 ft. 9 inches
Standing high jump.....	3 ft. 7 inches
Running broad jump.....	17 ft. 8 inches
Running high jump.....	4 ft. 6 inches
Shot-put (12 lb.).....	37 ft. 8 inches
Discus throw.....	85 ft.
Football punt.....	39 yds. 1 ft.
Hundred yard dash.....	12 seconds
Thirty-five yard dash.....	4 seconds flat

The time made in the last event must be considered extraordinary. It was made in a trial heat, and a few minutes later the same young man ran the final heat in four and one-fifth seconds. Perhaps it is only fair to say that one man won five of the above-mentioned events: viz., the two running jumps, the shot-put, the discus throw and the football punt. This lad can see enough to tell light from darkness and has unusual muscular ability. However, he met strong competition in all events, excepting the jumps; and it must be remembered that the star man with the discus of the autumn before was totally blind.

How did the superintendent's experiment with football work out? An illustration will suffice. In the school was a lanky, lazy, good-natured lad of seventeen, born blind, and nicknamed "Feet." "Feet's" most vigorous exercise was to walk out to the iron steps on the south side of the building and soak in the sunshine on a sunny day. The same lassitude was manifested in his studies, and in the care of his person. He had but little sense of shame and long ago had become accustomed to being called the "poorest stick" in school. He was about as inert as a live human could be. He had never been known to speak a piece without breaking down, and was convinced that he could not and didn't care. He had been given a



good physique by nature, but felt under no obligations to use it. However, he could jump fairly well. One evening when some of the better jumpers were not out for practice he managed to beat the crowd. He was commended and seemed pleased. The next night he appeared anxious to work. He kept on and now holds the school record. About the same time he presented a declamation to the school. He took care to dress himself well for the occasion, and when his name was called

gave his whole selection, a long one at that, without a break, and he actually became so enthusiastic as to make a few creditable gestures. "Feet" had awakened the sleeping spirit of contest through activity upon the field. All "institution" boys are characterized by lack of ambition, and this boy's condition is an index to the general tendency of them all. What athletics did for "Feet" it did for every boy in school, making him despise sloth and wish for power, love activity.

## TAILS AND THEIR USES

BY C. WILLIAM BEEBE\*

AUTHOR OF "TWO BIRD LOVERS IN MEXICO," "THE BIRD" AND "THE LOG OF THE SUN"

THE casual observer has no idea of the importance of tails among the various classes of animals, nor of the bewildering number of uses to which they are put. Tails are exceedingly ancient structures, and long before arms and legs were evolved they wriggled and waved and curved, aiding their owners millions of years ago as they do to-day.

When next we visit a zoölogical park or museum let us keep an eye out for tails and their uses, and we shall be surprised how interesting we shall find them.

To begin at home, when a dog turns around in a close circle once or twice on the hearth rug, before lying down, and then drops his head contentedly upon his hind leg and curls his tail forward, we have a hint of the primitive use of this member. The sensitive naked nose of a dog, wolf or fox is his chief asset in life. Without this wonderful organ of scent these creatures would be unable to procure their food; so when zero weather threatens every exposed organ, the thick hair of the tail is wrapped close over the nose, affording a covering, warm but porous for breathing purposes.

In the hands of his master—man—the dog has proved to be wonderfully plastic material, not only in nature and in mental capacity, but throughout his whole being—his entire structure from head to toe.

The tail, even in the primitive wolfish ancestor, was in use as an indicator of the creature's mood. It wagged in affection and stiffened in anger long before man tamed its owner, and at the first brutal attempts this member was often tucked safely between the hind legs as the animal fled in terror from the savage.

In the intelligent dog of modern times the tail unites with the eyes in all but producing speech; a word of approval will cause a hundred frantic wags; a reproof will send it drooping dejectedly.

There is no more perfect proof of the radical way in which dogs have been altered in their deepest nature by the influence of man, than in the accomplishments of the pointer and setter. The hunt is the especial province of the wolf and the dog. When pursuing their prey they approach nearest to primal conditions and farthest from man's influence. But wolves and wild dogs have but one method in hunting—to unite in packs or bands and, by means of scent, to follow the trail of their prey until they have sighted it, when with fatal perseverance they run it down. Hence a foxhound's duty is almost a normal instinct; but when a pointer scents the game, he must repress all the instincts which are deepest and substitute for them

\*Curator of Ornithology; New York Zoölogical Park.



## PAMPHLET BINDERS

This is No. 1527

also carried in stock in the following sizes

	HIGH	WIDE	THICKNESS		HIGH	WIDE	THICKNESS
1523	9 inches	7 inches	$\frac{1}{2}$ inch	1529	12 inches	10 inches	$\frac{1}{2}$ inch
1524	10 "	7 "	"	1530	12 "	$9\frac{1}{2}$ "	"
1525	9 "	6 "	"	1932	13 "	10 "	"
1526	$9\frac{3}{4}$ "	$7\frac{1}{2}$ "	"	1933	14 "	11 "	"
1527	$10\frac{1}{2}$ "	$7\frac{3}{4}$ "	"	1934	16 "	12 "	"
1528	11 "	8 "	"				

Other sizes made to order.

MANUFACTURED BY  
**LIBRARY BUREAU**  
 Division of REMINGTON RAND INC.  
 Library Supplies of all kinds



